

History of the Khoja Shia Ithna Ashari Shia Muslims

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Some 600 years ago a missionary by the name of Pir Sadruddin arrived in Sind in India. There are a number of myths about his origins. The most common consensus among historians is that he was Dai (representative or emissary) of the Nizari branch of the Ismaili sect. Some have suggested that he was a Sufi teacher from Iran. There is even a story that he was a Hindu priest by the name Sahdev who had been caught stealing in the temple and hence disgraced and defrocked. He then left the temple, changed his appearance and took on the name of Sadr Din.

Pir Sadruddin lived for some time amongst the rich Hindu landowners called Thakkers. He studied their way of life and of worship. The Thakkers believed that the god Vishnu had lived through nine incarnations on this earth. They were waiting for the tenth. Pir Sadruddin managed to convince them that Hazrat Ali (AS.) was the Dasmo Awtaar of Vishnu (The Tenth Incarnation). He converted quite a number of the Thakkers into a faith called Satpanth (True Path) - a peculiar admixture of Sufi/Hindu ideas. (The main book called Das Awtar was considered a primary text for the followers of the Aga Khan until very recently.) Some historians maintain that he converted the Thakkers to Nizari Ismailis. Whatever may be the case, these converts could no longer be called Thakkers in the Hindu community and Pir Sadruddin gave them the title of Khwaja. The word Khoja is a phonetic corruption of the word Khwaja.

Over a period of time, several Pirs came after Sadrudin and gradually, the beliefs crystallized to those of the Ismaili Nizari faith; particularly after the arrival of the Aga Khan from Iran to India in the first half of the 19th Century. By this time the Khojas had spread all over over Kutch and Gujarat. Some had also moved to Bombay and Muscat. They paid their dues to the Ismaili Jamaat Khaana and lived quite harmoniously within their society. The main place of worship was the Jamaat Khaana and the (Jamaat) community was organized round the Jamaat Khaana - which served as a religious as well as a social centre

With the arrival of the Aga Khan in India, greater control was exercised by the Aga Khan in the affairs of the community. This led to certain groups dissenting and being ousted from the Jamaat Khaana. The most celebrated one was the case of the Bar Bhaya where an influential family by the name of Habib Ibrahim refused to accept the dictate (firman) by the Aga Khan that all the property that belonged to the Jamaat would now vest in the Aga Khan. Eventually

this group was out-casted and influenced by the Sunni Aalims they became Sunnites. This was followed by several court cases and much commotion in the community. In the early 1800s some Khojas went for Ziyarat and while in Najaf they met the Mujtahid of the time, Sheikh Zainul Aabedeen Mazandarani. During their discussions they realized that there was a need for a teacher to come to India to teach the community Islam. Soon after, at the behest of Sheikh Mazandarani, Mulla Kader Hussein arrived in India and some Khoja families left the Ismaili sect and learnt from Mulla Kader the principles of Shia Ithna Asheri faith. From these few families the community has now grown to well over 100,000 Khoja Shia Ithna Asheries. The overall number is still very small when considering that there are an estimated 150 million Shia Ithna Asheries in the world today. The Ismaili Khojas number over 270 .thousand and there are still a handful of Sunni Khojas

Migration to Africa

It is a well known fact that for hundreds of years Indians sailed down the East African coast in their sail ships during the North Eastern Monsoons. There were young Khojas amongst these early sailors and some of them stayed behind in East Africa and exploited opportunities in commerce and trade.

While the new land offered limitless opportunities to the Khojas, the new environment and prevailing influences called for an orientation. The majority of them converted from Ismaili after arriving in East Africa and were novices in a complete sense of the term:-

- new to the place
- new to the faith
- facing a vast unexplored tract of land
- no previous cultural contact with the indigenous African population
- not knowing the African language
- not able to communicate with the established Arab traders

Jamaats

Against all odds, the Khojas settled all over Eastern Africa and with help from each other they prospered. And wherever they settled they soon formed themselves into a Khoja Shia Ithnaasheri Community, commonly known as the Jamaat, guarded by a sense of territorial jealousy.

They advised each other and invited their families, friends and fellow men from India to join

.them and share in their venture

Religious Centres

Members of the Jamaat engaged in religious activities, first with modesty appropriate to their means; but as their fortunes grew, they became vigorously activated. They built Mosques, Imambaras, Madrassas, and Schools for

Retention of identity

Under the subsequent German rule in Tanganyika, British rule in other parts of East Africa, French rule in Madagascar, Italian rule in Somalia, Belgian rule in the Congo and Portuguese rule in Mozambique, these early settlers were subjected to a variety of influences and experience.

The thrust of these influences was great, engendering a fear in the minds of the Khoja of losing their identity. It served to drive them farther inwards into the precincts of their society, instead of mobilizing any worthwhile change. Hence the persistent perseverance by the Khojas to .remain within a well-knit framework of the Jamaat, allowing no intrusion

Beyond Africa

In the same manner, that the young Khojas had braved the monsoons in search for better pastures, the Khoja Community has now spread all over the world. An International Directory published some two years ago has entries from most North America, Australia, New Zealand in addition to Western Europe and not forgetting Norway near the North Pole. The directory also contains some entries from South America and Eastern Europe.

The African experience has been replicated in almost all the places that they have settled in so far as organizing Jamaats and religious centers. The efficient system of managing the affairs of the community remains virtually unchanged.

However, now the community faces a new challenge, particularly in the West. The new generation, born and bred in the West is questioning the modus operandi and the insularity of the community whilst the old guard insists upon retaining what has worked well for the community for almost a century. What is clear is that both groups need to focus on the best way of ensuring that the future generations can retain the values and teachings as taught by .the Ahlul Bait (AS). For that is and can be the only objective

:For more detail, please visit the following link

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